

live well, work well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home, and life—brought to you by the insurance and healthcare specialists at M3.

Pancreatic Cancer

Approximately 42,500 Americans are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer every year. Seldom detected in its early stages, pancreatic cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths with around 35,000 deaths each year in the U.S.

Onset

Most pancreatic cancers begin in the cells lining the ducts of the pancreas. A rare form of pancreatic cancer, islet cell cancer, may begin in the cells that make insulin and other hormones. When pancreatic cancer spreads, it can be found in the lymph nodes, liver, lungs or the tissue lining the abdomen.

Causes and Risk Factors

The specific cause of pancreatic cancer is unknown, but there are risk factors that have been identified, including:

- **Age** – Most pancreatic cancer occurs in those in their 70s or 80s.
- **Smoking** – Cigarette smokers are two to three times more likely to develop pancreatic cancer.
- **Diabetes** – Pancreatic cancer occurs more often in those who have diabetes than those who do not.
- **Race** – African-Americans are more likely to get this type of cancer.

- **Health** – Being overweight or obese increases the risk of pancreatic cancer.
- **Family history** – The risk triples for those that have immediate family suffering from the disease.
- **Chronic pancreatitis** – This painful condition of the pancreas is thought to increase the risk for pancreatic cancer.

Exposure to certain chemicals or eating a high-fat diet can also increase the chances of getting the disease.

Symptoms

Pancreatic cancer is often called a “silent disease” because signs and symptoms may not occur until the cancer is very advanced. As it grows, signs may include:

- Upper abdominal back pain
- Yellow skin and eyes, and dark urine from jaundice
- Weakness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Weight loss

Diagnosis

If a patient has symptoms of pancreatic cancer, a doctor will perform a physical exam, run lab tests, and possibly perform a

biopsy. If further testing is necessary, it may include a CT scan, an ultrasound, laparoscopy or angiography.

Treatment

Unfortunately, pancreatic cancer is only curable when found at a very early stage, before it has spread. During this time, treatment options will likely include surgery, radiation therapy or chemotherapy. When a cure or control of the disease is not possible, many patients choose palliative therapy, which aims to improve the quality of life by controlling pain and addressing other problems associated with the cancer.

Prevention

Since the cause of pancreatic cancer is not known, it is not considered preventable. However, the best way to avoid it is to quit smoking, eat a healthy diet, maintain a healthy weight, and exercise daily.



Did you know...?

Pain is a common issue for those dealing with pancreatic cancer; a tumor can press against nerves and other organs. To alleviate the discomfort, a doctor may prescribe pain medication, shrink the tumor with radiation, inject alcohol into the area around certain nerves or even cut nerves to block pain.